



Will Things Ever Be the Same Again? by TheRealSokka

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Summary: It's the summer of 1988 when the Byers family finally manage to go on holiday, as far away from Hawkins, Indiana as possible. The small town of Carmel-by-the-Sea seems calm and beautiful at first, and it is perfect. But after Will Byers meets some strange new friends, things take a turn. People start to go missing, and this girl, Jane, seems to know more than she is letting on.

Will Things Ever Be the Same Again?

Chapter 1: A Fresh Start

The car is sweltering hot; has been that way for the last couple of miles, ever since the sun came up. It's almost unbearable.

Outside, the sparse trees move in a gust of wind coming from the West and Will leans his head out the window to catch the fresh breeze, sighing as it hits his face. He thinks the air tastes a little salty, but that might just be his hopeful imagination.

"Be careful honey; you're going to get sunburn." Joyce warns, looking at him pointedly. It's her typical 'mother-knows-what's-best' look, and it can last for a long time if she wants it to. Given that she's the driver, Will thinks it prudent to do as she says so that she can focus on the road again.

"We're going to get sunburn in here, either way." he points out, indicating their arms and torsos which are completely bathed in sunlight. The blinds of this ancient car haven't been great to begin with, and now, a few hundred kilometres into their trip, they have long since given up and stopped working completely. Not that Will can really blame them with this frankly unbelievable Californian heat. He turns around in his seat: "Jonathan, can you reach the sunscreen?"

His older brother on the backseat gives a non-committal shrug and attempts to stretch into the trunk of the car as best as he can. After a minute of fumbling, he comes back up with a small yellow bottle in his hands. He tosses it to Will with a matter-of-fact "This is never going to last."

"I should have bought more." Joyce mutters to herself.

"Where would we have put it? I can already barely move back here." Jonathan says. For emphasis, he pats the two giant suitcases on either side of him. As if they felt provoked, both cases suddenly lurch sideways as the car hits a bump in the uneven road and he has to

make a grab for the left one to stop it from crushing him.

"We'll get some more once we get to the beach." Joyce says resolutely, not paying the near-catastrophe on the backseat much mind. She glances at Will smearing his bare arms with the cream. "You think you can do my arms too, Will?" she asks. Her fingers on the steering wheel already look unhealthily red.

"Sure." Will replies, though he's really not quite sure. He tries his best to pull it off without hindering his mother's ability to drive, which could end really badly on this road they are currently on. At some point, in Joyce's quest to find the fastest way to their destination before dark, they must have abandoned even the secondary and tertiary roads, and Will is not sure what this one would be called, but it can't be anywhere near the top ten numbers with how badly it is kept. Maybe it would be a good idea for them to stop by the roadside to put the cream on, but the sides are completely overgrown and if they did that they might end up in an undisclosed ditch. So, improvised in-car care it is.

In the end it works out more or less, with some helpful comments from Jonathan, who sounds like he is enjoying this far too much. At least they don't crash and, after tossing the bottle back to his brother, all of them are sun-proof, too – long before they have even seen the beach.

Their entire trip from Indiana has been like this: just the three of them in this old car; things on it regularly breaking; them sometimes losing their path and going down obscure country roads instead of the main highway; the weather trying its hardest to make everything even more challenging; and lots of impromptu improvisations by the Byers.

Will, for his part, loves it.

A few miles farther, after they've found their way back on to a slightly bigger road and the dry, rocky landscape gradually starts giving way to somethings resembling a forest, Jonathan comments, "I think I can smell the sea."

Will promptly leans out the window again. Yes; now there is

definitely salt on the air. His heart starts beating faster with excitement. *The sea!*

Until now, he has spent the entire sixteen years of his life in Hawkins, Indiana – they could never afford long holidays. But now, finally, after a year of anticipation, they're here, heading for California's beaches. He can't wait. He has seen pictures, of course, but he's still not prepared for the real thing.

Their car (laboriously) climbs one last rise in the road, reaches the peak, and then, without warning, there it is. Clear blue water as far as the eye can see. And, closer, white sand beaches alternating with rocky cliffs that look tiny from this distance. There is a small town hugging the shore, with one or two taller buildings whose glass reflects the fading sunlight, but they are completely dwarfed by the *vastness* that is suddenly in view.

Will can barely take it all in. The joy bubbles up to his throat and breaks out as a loud, "Whoohoooo!", and he spreads his arms like he wanted to hug it all.

Joyce grins hugely, again looking at her son more than the road. "Whewhooo!" she joins in his whooping, sounding just as carefree if not more so. Perhaps, just maybe, she was just as glad to get away as he was. She refrains from throwing her arms up, though.

A mechanic *Click!* makes both of them turn around to see Jonathan with his camera cocked, grinning at them. Will returns it, just as the camera goes off again. "Jonathan!" Joyce says in protest. It doesn't sound all that grudging.

Their place is almost right outside the town, but remote enough that its noise barely reaches. It is a small hut about half-a-mile away from the beach, right behind a big sand dune. That means they can't actually see the beach from the porch, but Will can hear it constantly; can hear the waves rolling on the shore and the seagulls screeching overhead. He doesn't think he has stopped smiling all evening.

Joyce is her usual busy self, racing around the four-room place and muttering things like, "*Need more water in the fridge.*", "*Bloody lights.*",

"*Suncream; tomorrow.*" and "*Should do; should do.*". By now she has inspected everything twice over and made at least three separate shopping lists for the town next day. It would have probably sufficed to do all that tomorrow, but, well, that's not Joyce.

Her boys have stowed away their belongings and helped her with whatever else needed doing, and now they've climbed the sand dune and sat down to watch the ocean. Will occasionally glances back to the hut, expecting Joyce to join them at some point, but judging by the flickering lights she is still busy. "It's new territory; mom won't rest easy until she's organized it to death." Jonathan states, and Will nods absentmindedly.

The sun is sinking into the horizon, turning everything a bright shade of red. Even at this time of day, the beach is still buzzing with people; swimming in the water or lying on towels or playing games. It's so different from sleepy little Hawkins it's almost bizarre.

To Will's mind, that is not at all a bad thing. At home, and especially back in school, he has lately felt like he'd suffocate with every day being the same, again and again. Now he feels like he can breathe freely for the first time in years. Hawkins, its school, hospital and bullies are far away, and for the next two weeks Will doesn't even want to think about them.

Jonathan nudges him. "Watcha thinking?"

Will shrugs. "That this is perfect."

"Yeah." his brother agrees. "Something else than home, ey?"

Will looks at him. Jonathan's features are contrasted sharply in the setting sun and he looks more adult now than Will remembers. He barely stops himself from saying that, No; he didn't mean just this place, though that's part of it. Above all, having all three of them together again is the biggest factor in this 'perfect'. He hasn't told his brother just how much he misses him, nor does he ever plan to. Jonathan is happy in New York, and he is not going to ruin that for him. They have two weeks, and whatever comes after doesn't matter right now.

"Yeah; definitely something else." he says, half-leaning against his brother.

The best thing about Jonathan is that he can somehow always tell when Will needs to be cheered up, but never pressures him to talk about it. Not now, either. There's another gentle nudge: "Hey; want to hear some music?"

Will's head snaps around to him. "What? You haven't actually packed it, have you?!" he asks incredulously.

"When mom wasn't looking." Jon grins, getting to his feet. He slides down the dune to their hut and comes back a moment later with his big boombox over his shoulder, proud like an angler with the biggest catch imaginable.

The thing must have taken up almost his entire luggage space. Will shakes his head fondly. "That is so stupid." he states.

"Hey, you want to listen to some quality rock or not?"

"Just play it. It's still stupid."

Joyce ends up joining them eventually, looking satisfied with her progress. She rolls her eyes when she sees the boombox next to Jonathan, but nothing more. *The Final Countdown* is playing when she sits down and the two of them make a game of having her guess the lyrics. Will goes to bed that night still occasionally bursting into giggles at the memory. He has no idea how his mother managed to understand '*Leaving for Venus*' as '*Living for Peanuts*', but he just knows he will never be able to un-hear that again.

For the first time in weeks, his dreams are light.

They head off early for the beach the next morning. Aside from an elderly couple in a pair of wicker chairs, they are the only people for miles. Will, or rather the excited little child in him, immediately runs up to the water and dips his toes in, only to immediately jump back from the cold. It is bloody *freezing*. Somehow he has imagined Californian water to just always be warm. But he is finally at the sea and he refuses to let a little chill stop him: After resolutely bracing

himself, he waits for a larger wave and jumps in headfirst.

He comes back up sputtering and shivering because *holy God this is cold* and is met with Jonathan grinning at him from the shore and giving a sarcastic thumbs-up. He throws a middle-finger back his direction.

The beach starts to fill with people as the sun climbs higher, and pretty soon the quiet of the morning gives way to the buzzing activity that Will only caught the edges of yesterday. It's another new experience to be right in the middle of this, and he can't decide whether he likes it yet. At least nobody pays attention to him; nobody here even knows his name. It's a nice feeling. He could get used to that.

While Jonathan eventually heads off to play beach ball, Joyce and Will lay out their towels and make themselves comfortable with their respective books. He is currently in the middle of re-reading *The Hobbit* for what has to be the hundredth time, and he has subconsciously placed it in his luggage even before the question of what books to bring even came up. There is also a copy of Alan Dean Foster's *Alien* somewhere in there, but so far he has never made it past the first five chapters. Maybe if he tries reading it by daylight on a beach crowded with people, he thinks, he'll be able to stop himself from fearfully looking over his shoulder every time he turns a page. Maybe.

But for now, Middle Earth it is. Even though he has read it a hundred times, the book never fails to draw him in every single time again. The buzz of the crowd and the rushing of the waves fades into the background after a while – a different and therefore nice backdrop that somehow manages to make the lands he travels through with the thirteen dwarves feel even more vibrant and life-like.

He is so absorbed that he doesn't even notice the shadow falling over him until somebody clears his throat right above him. "Excuse me, sir. Do you have a minute?"

Will blinks his eyes open to be met with a middle-aged blond woman, wearing an orange shirt and holding a clipboard. She is looking down at him expectantly, waiting for an answer. Will instinctively glances

over his shoulder, but of course there is no one else the woman is talking to. "Me?" he asks hesitantly.

"Yes." the woman smiles. She has a nice smile. "My name is Marinda Thomas. Sorry to disturb you, but my institute is doing a survey of the visitors here in Carmel. You're here on holiday? Mind if I ask you a few questions?" She drops her matter-of-fact style briefly to wink at him: "We give out ice cream to our interviewees, I should add."

On the towel next to Will, Joyce has lifted up her sunglasses to follow the exchange. Will can practically hear her alarm bells chime. She tends to distrust official-looking people in general, and the woman with her clipboard and her survey fits into that category perfectly. But her and Will have made a deal before they started on this trip, that she tries not to mother him so much with other people, so now she just looks to him questioningly: "Will?"

He shrugs. "Yeah. I mean, No; I don't mind. Go ahead." he tells the woman.

"Beautiful." She smiles sweetly and readies her notebook. "How long are you staying here at Carmel?"

"Two weeks."

"What made you choose this place for holiday?"

"The beach sounded nice." Will smiles absentmindedly. "And there's supposed to be a big art community here. I wanted to have a look around."

"Oh? Are you an artist yourself?"

"No, no." Damn his stupid embarrassed blushing. "I just, you know, draw from time to time, that's all."

"Very well." Joyce chimes in from the side, smiling gently at the glare Will throws her way.

"Then I think you've come to the perfect place." The woman points in the general direction of the city: "There's a quick-painting contest this Thursday; I'd join up if I had any talent. Are you here with friends or

family, other than your mother, obviously?"

"Ah, no, it's just us and my brother, Jonathan." He tries to ignore the little painful sting that her mention of *friends* has caused in his chest. He's never really had a friend except for his brother. Not in Hawkins. Maybe he could make some here where nobody knows him, but he doubts it. He's not very good at opening up to people.

There are a few more questions about where they live while they're staying here; if they're satisfied with the accommodation and the state of the beach; and even about the book he is reading and why he picked it, though Will assumes that is more of a polite question, because what use would that information have for the survey? The woman doesn't seem to be in a hurry. At the end of it, as promised she drops three popsicles into his hands; two chocolates and one vanilla; Will's favourite. "Thanks for your time. You've been very helpful" she smiles and heads off for the next group.

Joyce looks after her, thoughtfully sucking on the chocolate that Will hands her. "Two hours at the beach and already we're getting surveyed." She glances at him: "You okay, sweetheart?"

Will rolls his eyes. "Yes, mom. It was just a couple of question." His mother has a scary ability to pick up on anything that makes him in the slightest bit uncomfortable, and an even scarier disposition to immediately want to fight off those things with tooth and claw. He loves her for that; he does. But, really, he is sixteen going on seventeen now, and anyway, it's not the interviewer's fault that Will Byers is a bit of a loner. He'll be fine. Yes; *really*, mom.

"So, how about that art contest?" she probes.

"No. I don't like watercolours. Or paint. Besides, there'll be a lot more talented people than me there."

"Hm. Alright." Joyce gives in and leans back with her book.

Will squints at her suspiciously. That was much too quick. His mother has a far too high appreciation for his drawings – according to her they could be displayed in an exhibition or something; which is so stupid – and he has never known her to give in so easily. Maybe the

beach has inspired her to just relax for once. Miracles might be possible.

By the time it's 1:00pm, the sun is bearing down on the beach, it is sweltering hot and the sand has started to boil. Even for Will, who deplores the cold damp of Indiana, this heat is starting to become uncomfortable. Then Jonathan re-joins them with his arms red as a lobster's; having managed to get sunburn despite the suncream, and that is when they decide to pack up and explore the town, instead. Joyce needs to work off her shopping list, and Jonathan offhandedly mentions having heard about a record store in the town centre, which catches Will's attention immediately. He grips his brother's arm in his excitement and mumbles a low "Sorry!" when Jonathan flinches at the touch of the hot skin.

They're just about finished shaking out their beach towels when a voice from behind them says "Joyce?!"

All three Byers turn around to see a man standing there, looking back at them in surprise. He is wearing just a pair of swim trunks, with a surfboard tucked under one arm and a folding chair under the other. He's got short hair, a mustache and the beginning of a paunch.

Somehow, strangely, Will gets a feeling of authority from him. Maybe it comes from the way the man is carrying himself, because it certainly can't be anything else about his appearance. He looks vaguely familiar, almost as if...

"Hopper!" Joyce exclaims and all but launches herself at the stranger. She only stops a foot away from him, dropping her arms that were attempting to hug him and instead breaks into a bombardment of questions: "What are you doing here? Where have you been?! Why have I not heard a single *word* from you?!"

The man – Hopper – chuckles. His voice is really deep. "Missed you too, Joyce."

"Shut up, you idiot." Joyce pulls back a little, inspecting him critically from head to toe. "You've grown fat."

Jonathan and Will exchange a glance. They both seem to be out of

the loop. There clearly is history here; their mother normally doesn't assault people she comes across on the beach. Will is dying to know what is going on, but he suddenly feels like he is intruding on a private moment. Jonathan clearly has the same impression, so they both just hang back for the time being.

Fortunately, that is when Joyce seems to remember she is not alone. Her face is a little flushed when she turns around. "Ah, boys, this is Jim. Hopper. He's – we know each other from before. He's a friend."

"Jonathan? My, you've grown tall." Jim Hopper comments, his eyes skimming first over Jonathan and then over Will. "And you must be Will." He turns his head and motions behind him, to a girl who is standing there and whom Will hasn't even noticed until now. Not surprising, because next to the big man she all but disappears.

She has a small frame, boyishly short hair, seems to be about Will's age and looks slightly uncomfortable to be here. At Hopper's gesture, she hesitantly steps forward. Hopper gives her a smile that seems to be meant as encouragement. "This is Jane, my daughter."

The girl raises a hand in a short greeting. Will looks at her curiously, and as Jane picks up on that, their eyes meet. Hers are dark and deep and guarded, combining into a fascinating mixture that he somehow can't look away from.

So, anyone who has read anything by me knows that I adore Will and El (+ Mike) together (fingers crossed for the new season!), but I'll try to give everybody else time to shine, too. I've never written a murder mystery before, so bear with me if the beginning is mostly slow and friendship-filled build-up. This is friendship first and murder mystery second.

Notes on this canon: For a start, Will and Co are around 17 in this, and none of the crew have met before. So their stories and personalities will necessarily be slightly different. As to the supernatural elements and whether anyone has powers or not - I'll leave that to the story to explain.

Note on this story: I could use someone to beta-read this, especially someone who knows a bit about 80s culture to fix all the blunders that I am going to make. Because just from this first chapter I could tell there

will be a lot.